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NO PLACE LIKE HOME

My Office

by Richard Meltzer

I'VE SAID IT BEFORE AND I'LL SAY IT AGAIN: THIS IS NOT MY HOME, IT'S MY OFFICE. IF YOU THINK I MEAN THIS TOWN, YEAH, I MEAN THIS TOWN. THERE'S VERY LITTLE HERE I WANNA DO, VERY LITTLE OFFERED THAT I WANT ANY PART OF, HARDLY ANY DISTRACTIONS — SO I GET A LOT OF WORK DONE. MORE THAN I CAN LEGITIMATELY IMAGINE GETTING DONE IN A THRILLING ENVIRONMENT LIKE, SAY, CLEVELAND. OR CINCINNATI.

And that goes double, triple, at least single, for the space over which (unlike the town) I have got some control: my actual living space. My physical home, my mailing address, my where I hang my hat — or would if I had one — my so-called residence. My apartment. "These digs were made for working," reads the sign above the door. Y'better believe it.

In the last 3-4-5-6 years writing for me has become one incredibly arduous chore. A mission. It used to be play, even mischief. It was such easy pickin's I could just about do it in my sleep. Dreams in fact would often do the shitwork, generating *usable* bulk copy for more assignments than not. All I had to do was wake up and transcribe it. Like I said, mischief. "I have had my fun," it says somewhere in a drawer.

But now that I've gotten grimly solemn and more than gratuitously "serious" about the damn thing, now that my sick fucking sense of the world depends on me not only getting it but getting it right, everything (qua "verity") has got to be correct, everything (qua "communication") has got to be clear, everything (qua "creative expression") has got to be syllable-perfect, heart-true. Which means many, many drafts, many, many days for what used to take minutes, used to be *automatic*. It's become a responsible act!

A typical day is I get up, check the clock, feel terrible guilt if it's later than 9 o'clock, and either work or feel horribly guilty about *not* working every waking minute, every second, till I sleep it off and try it again. Do I ever try it different? Not so's I can remember. All told, all seasons, I average a good 8-9-10-11-12-13 hours of writing a day — when ill, slightly less — and this is every, y'know, seven days a week. When not actually writing — *physically* writing — I'm basically *thinking* about writing. I hardly use the dump I live in for anything else.

After hours? There's only *during* hours. Whatever is, is part of a given day's nose-to-the-grindstone. My only significant current "pleasures" — reading and recorded jazz — are just as office-bound, just as plugged into the work-ethic continuum as changing ribbons on my typewriter or clipping (and filing) a published critique of owlshit.

Records, okay, let's take my records. I must have a billion — at least a couple thousand — jazz elpees, yet how many do I actually feel "free" to spin at a given moment? Not many. Albums I've played so far this week: *Django Reinhardt and His American Friends* (e.g., Coleman Hawkins, Benny Carter); *It Is in the Brewing Luminous* (Cecil Taylor); *The Jazz Giants '56 (Lester Young, Vic Dickenson, Roy Eldridge); The Complete Bennie Moten (vol. 3/4)*; *This Is Our Music* (Ornette Coleman); *Soul Station* (Hank Mobley). In other words, stuff I've so totally already *absorbed* it's like part of my DNA.

'Cause anything else means distraction. If I put on something new, say, or anything I haven't in fact come close to *memorizing*, if it's audible I'm gonna listen, I'm ultimately gonna pay attention, *strict* attention (to all the riffs, solos, sonorities, etc.); I'm gonna *think about* the fucker (instead of, um, my work), and all such counterproductive hoop-dee-doo. The time, if there is one, for doing such thinking, such primary absorbing, for thus making a record *safe* for worktime service, is (let's say) during meals. Or like half an hour in the morning (guilt! guilt!) or just before bed. It may be the healing force of the universe, and (universe knows) I could use some healing, but if Music ain't easing my task at the frigging typewriter there'll be no Music for me (and the Silence, y'know, is like dyin').

Anne Fishbein

My apartment. "These digs were made for working," reads the sign above the door. Y'better believe it.

(Look, hey, I know: fuck *me*. I could be working in a coal mine. One without turntables. I certainly could.)

Anyway, the optimum LP is one that can actually "accompany" my playing, er, typing. As time goes by, howev, there seem to be fewer and fewer in my ever-expanding collection that do the trick. There're weeks sometimes months — months — where all I can play is piano trios with nonobtrusive basses. Charlie Parker lately has been elbowing me into too nonspecific, too frenetic, an intensity (which if it ain't putting wind in your own actual solo it's obstructing it). I *never* play vocals while I'm writing. Other people's words would just nip it all in the bud.

No, I take that back. That's vocals, not books, and here goes another long story. Back when writing was play, so was reading. Or so I insisted it be. And since reading *can't* be play, I didn't. I didn't read. There was a point somewhere in my 30s where I did some calculations and figured I'd written more words, more pages, than the total I'd read — true. In the last few years, though, my years as a grim, solemn fuck, I've come to regard the already printed page with as much respect, or at least curiosity, as the not yet conceived. I need to see, I've begrudgingly come to admit, what other assholes in this biz, living or dead, have gotten away with. It so happens I've also in the process come to "enjoy" reading, but with pleasure once again running neck and neck with responsibility, with a previous lifetime's worth of reading to catch up on, and with only maybe 15 minutes a day left open for such research/frivolity (you can listen while you write, but you can't read), it don't look like much fun for anyone.

The next 11 books I will read: Brion Gysin, *The Last Museum*; Jane Bowles, *Plain Pleasures*; Neal Cassady, *The First Third*; D.H. Lawrence, *Sons and Lovers*; Edmond Jabes, *The Book of Questions* (v. 1); Faulkner, *Intruder in the Dust*; Kafka, *Amerika*; Robbe-Grillet, *La Maison de Rendezvous*; Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*; George Higgins, *A Choice of Enemies*; Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*. Art Fein keeps saying I should read Dostoyevsky. Maybe in '89 or '90.

Books, records, let's reel this back in: Welcome to my office. To the *office* part of my office. Where the furnace would be if this was a steam-powered train. I work in the kitchen, i.e., I type in the kitchen, it's where my old-fashioned (in the sense that it's not a computer) electronic typewriter w/ three pages of storage is all set up. Without the clickety click clack of impact on page (speaking of trains) I'd be lost. Also in the kitchen are a desk, a chair, a nondigital clock radio that I never play, a Rolodex, a stapler, scissors, a recycled Progresso Manhattan-style clam chowder can full of pencils, a recycled Progresso lentil soup can full of pens, a short stack of typing paper (white), a tall stack of typing paper (yellow), a paperweight consisting of a Mail Pouch chewing tobacco "carspidor" filled with rusty nails and plaster, a garbage bag, three overstuffed, overtaxed bookcases, a stove, a fridge, a sink, a cupboard, a toaster, a teapot, a teakettle, six pots, three pans, eight bowls, nine plates, 10 cups, 13 knives, 12 forks, 17 spoons, and numerous miscellaneous utensils.

And the food, uh, the fuel for the train? Let's see, for today I've got a large bag of sliced pepperoni, the kind that gives you cancer *and* heart disease just looking at it, and for tomorrow two boxes of red licorice. That's all; bought it two paragraphs ago. It's tough shopping two days ahead. When you've got a deadline staring you in the chin, there's no time to think *whut am I gonna eat? whut am I gonna eat?* You just go down to the store and grab the first thing that grabs you, sometimes (on the way to the checkout) the second. There's hardly ever time for a third. So in two days I'll be back, a whole new adventure, one of the few times I leave the premises, to maybe get some octupus in cottonseed oil or (to stay on the healthy side) salt-free sardines — a full day's fuel-supply of each.

Well it's been nice havin' ya. Maybe next time I'll show you my office *salle de bain*. Meantime . . . back to work. ■

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